

Puzzle Pieces by [nerdsarehot75](#)

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Summary:

It took Joyce a while to realise how easily Hopper had become part of her life again. It hadn't taken anyone else nearly so long.

Puzzle Pieces

Joyce was sitting in her car, waiting in front of the police station. The air was a little muggy inside. Hopper had agreed to go to dinner with her as a thank you for everything. It wasn't just the help with finding Will, although that was a large part of it. He'd stayed, helping out around the house, helping her.

The first time he'd come around he'd helped her repaper the living room. Jonathan had fixed the hole while she'd been at the hospital with Will. It had been a surprise to find it filled in and she'd spent the rest of the night smiling. The next day Hopper had shown up with glue and wallpaper. She'd smiled even wider at that.

They'd put the radio on to fill the house with music and had, together, stripped the paper off the wall and replaced it. They hadn't talked, not about anything important, but it was comfortable. She remembered thinking it had never been that easy with Lonnie. Their silences were always uncomfortable, but with Hopper it was as if she wasn't hiding behind words, that it was okay for him to see her in those quiet moments.

The living room had looked great afterwards and she'd made him dinner before she went back to the hospital. Jonathan hadn't said anything when he saw it the next day but when Will got home he'd instantly liked it, at least, more than the previous paper.

The car door opening startled Joyce from her thoughts. Hopper gave her a weary smile as he slid his hat off. She smiled back at him and started the engine.

"Busy day?" she asked,

"In Hawkins? Are you kidding?" he replied. She laughed at that and swung out of the parking lot.

"What about you?" he asked.

"The usual. Carl came in and tried to get another discount. Donald saw him off pretty quickly," she replied.

"He didn't cause any problems did he?" She could hear the worry in his voice.

"No, just the usual." Her voice was tinged with annoyance. If something was wrong he knew she would have told him. He patted her knee and she jumped before giving him a small smile.

"How's Will's science project?" Has he gotten it back yet?" he asked, changing the subject.

Hopper had been helping Will with the project. He'd sat with with him most nights, listening to him explain all kinds of concepts. He'd asked all the right questions and encouraged Will as he wrote everything. He'd even helped cut out bits of cardboard for the presentation. Joyce knew he hadn't really understood what Will was talking about but just the fact he'd tried had made her heart clench.

"He got an A, as if you didn't know he would," she replied, her smile becoming full of pride. He smiled at her too.

"So where are you taking me?" he asked.

"There's this nice Italian place the next town over," she replied.

The first time Hopper cooked dinner for the Byers family he'd made spaghetti Bolognese. She'd laughed at him and he told her it was the first dish he'd ever learnt to make. Will had watched with an intense focus and Hopper had explained every step. He'd even let Will determine when the spaghetti was cooked.

They'd sat around the table, the four of them, and eaten together. Jonathan had asked for the recipe and he'd written it down on a scrap of paper Will had given him. It was still stuck on her fridge from where he'd left it. He'd stayed late that night, listening to music with the boys, arguing with her over bedtimes.

"Are you trying to butter me up?" The smirk told her he was teasing, probably remembering that night too.

"Is it working?" she asked, a matching smirk on her face.

"I'll tell you after we've eaten," he replied.

They drove in silence for a while, the town limits going past quickly. The radio hadn't worked for a while now and Joyce hadn't bothered to repair it. She wasn't one to listen to it as she never drove far enough for it to matter. Mostly it was just between home and town. Hopper didn't complain. He was watching her and she tried to ignore how that caused butterflies to erupt in her stomach.

It had been happening more often lately. He'd do something, like look at her or brush his fingers against hers, and she'd almost fall apart. The butterflies were insistent, hard to ignore. At first it had scared her, feeling that way again, especially about Hopper, but now it was comforting, usual. It made her smile. She wondered if she had the same effect on him.

They pulled into the carpark and Joyce cut the engine. Hopper jumped out of the car and held the door open for her. She smiled at him and took his proffered arm, tucking herself against him. They were shown their table in the centre of the room. The flame of the

candle caused shadows to play across the red tablecloth.

The perused the menu, sneaking glances at each other when they thought the other wasn't looking and chuckling when they caught each other's eye. They placed their orders and settled back in their seats.

"How's Jonathan's applications going?" Hopper asked. Joyce took a sip of the wine they'd ordered.

"You know, still working on getting it perfect," she replied.

Hopper had watched all the hours Jonathan had been worrying over his application for NYU. He hadn't wanted to apply to any other college but after a talk with Hopper had decided having a few safety schools wouldn't be a bad idea.

Both Hopper and Joyce had read over his essay, giving any suggestions they'd had. They'd helped him sift through all the photos he'd taken, choosing the best ones to send. Just last weekend Hopper had stayed up almost all night with him, making sure he was okay, bringing him coffee and eventually forcing him to go to bed. Joyce had been surprised waking up the next morning to the mess spread out over the kitchen table and a tired Hopper on his tenth cup of coffee. She'd sent him to bed quickly after that, refusing to let him drive home. He'd protested the whole way, until his head hit the pillow. He'd emerged at lunch time, still tired, but more determined to go back home and get out of her hair.

"He'll get in," he said, shrugging.

"He's not so sure." She played with the cutlery.

"Do you think he won't?" he asked, surprised at her reaction.

"No, I'm sure he will. He's been talking about this since he was little. I'm worried about the stress he's putting on himself," she replied. He reached over and stilled her hands.

"It'll all be worth it when he gets that acceptance letter." She smiled at him, slightly strained.

"And then he'll move out and be living in New York which is so far away and it'll just be me and Will, and in a few years Will be moving out and then I'll be all alone," she rushed out in one breath.

"You won't be all alone. You can't get rid of me that easily," he replied. "And the boys will still visit."

Their food arrived then, interrupting them. Hopper pulled back from where his hand was still on her's. Joyce gave him a small smile before beginning her meal. He followed suit, and a quiet settled over them.

"Will wants to know if you're going to be at the science fair next weekend," she said, breaking their silence

"Oh, is that soon?" he asked.

"Yeah. I'm only asking because that project you worked on is going to be on display. I think he really wants you to be there," she replied.

"He's also been working on something with his friends in the AV club."

"I'll be there, Joyce. I wouldn't think of missing it," he reassured. He frowned. "Is Lonnie going to be there?"

"Of course not. He's never been to any before this. I doubt he cares enough to even ask." Her smile was tight again and he felt bad for bringing up her dickhead of an ex-husband.

"Tell Will I'll be there," he said. The tension left her body and he got a true smile from her. It was blinding and he could only smile back.

They finished their meal, making small talk, discussing work and gossiping about the people in town. It was comfortable, easy. They'd slipped so easily back into friendship, it felt like no work had been involved at all.

Joyce waved off Hopper's insistence at paying for at least his half of the meal. This was her thank you, and she'd been saving up for this. She led him back out into the carpark, darkness finally having settled around them. The moon was high in the sky, full and bright. It cast odd shadows on the ground, making everything have a silver tint.

She went to unlock the car until she felt Hopper's hand close around her wrist. She turned to look up at him, noticing the planes of his face, the scruff of his beard.

"Are you really worried about being alone?" he asked. She frowned at that. She shouldn't have voiced her fears, he probably thought she was being ridiculous.

"It's nothing," she brushed off, going to turn back around. His other hand caught her shoulder.

"No it's not. Are you, Joyce?" His eyes were piercing into her soul. She nodded, unwilling to give a voice to it. It was so small he'd have missed it if he wasn't watching her so intently.

"You don't have to worry. I meant what I said, I'm not going to let you be alone. I'll still be here when the boys are moved out and I'll make sure you see them often." He brushed his finger over the apple of her cheek.

She looked at him then, really looked. He towered above her, caging her in, but instead of feeling claustrophobic as she had with Lonnie,

she felt safe, protected. She thought about how easily Hopper had slid back into her life, as if he was the missing piece to her puzzle.

She gently cupped his cheek, feeling his beard scratch against her skin. He lent into it, almost nuzzling her palm

"I know you will." She drew him down for a kiss and he went willingly. Kissing Hopper now was different from kissing him as a teenager. Back then it was all hormones and lust but now it felt as if he were worshipping her. She felt as if she were the water to quench his never ending thirst.

His hands framed her face, so large and warm. Her arms had slid around his neck and her fingers buried in his hair. She had to stretch up on tip toes and he had to bend down but it was worth the minor discomfort. His lips were insistent, wanting more, longer, deeper. She was swept up in the delicious feeling, willing to do as he pleased when his main goal was her own pleasure.

It wasn't until her back hit the car that she broke away from him, panting and flushed. He looked down at her with such wonder, such amazement she had to take stock of herself. She bit her lip, looking away from his gaze, feeling very exposed.

"Joyce." His voice was soft and she let out a quiet moan. He said her name again, so full of reverence that she couldn't help but turn to look at him again. He kissed her again, chastely and undemanding. She lent her head on his chest once it was over and took a long breath.

He held her waist, secure and strong, arms easily spanning the circumference. Her own hands were curling around his belt loops, not tugging, just resting. He was bent over her, as if protecting her from the world, and she let him be the strong one for once.

"Joyce, the boys will be wondering where you are." His voice was disappointed, strained, and she pulled back to look at him. She was worrying her bottom lip between her teeth and he gently stopped her, one thumb resting on her lip. She gave him a small smile and turned to unlock the car. He let her this time. She tried to ignore the swoop of disappointment in her stomach.

The drive back was silent but charged. Both could feel the change happening, the crossroad they had come to. She could feel Hooper watching her but determinedly stared out the windshield, her hands clutching the wheel so tight her knuckles were white.

She pulled up to her house. Hopper had parked there that morning with the promise of this dinner. She'd given him a lift in as arranged

but now she wished she hadn't, that they'd driven separately. If she hadn't rocked the boat her stomach wouldn't be churning with uncertainty.

She climbed out of the car, ignoring his grasping hand. She heard his door slam behind her as she went to walk up the steps of her porch. He grasped her wrist and swung her around to face him. He looked hurt, confused, sad. She couldn't bear to look him in the eye.

"Joyce, what's going on?" he asked. His voice almost broke her in half.

"I don't know," she replied, scuffing the toe of her shoe in the dirt.

"That kiss. What does it mean?" he asked.

"What do you want it to mean?" she asked instead. He was silent for a moment and she went to draw away. His hand tightened around her and she froze.

"I want it to mean you're giving me another chance. I know sometimes I'm an ass and I should never have let you go all those years ago, but I'm not willing to let you go now. Just tell me I have a chance and I'm yours. I'll be yours even if you don't but I'd like a chance." His eyes were boring in her hers. She felt caught, unable to move. She blinked at him.

"Joyce?" he asked, concern now tinging his voice.

"You already were mine," she said, still dazed. He smiled at her and scooped her up into his arms. She laughed and hit his chest but kissed him anyway, her fingers cold against the skin of his neck.

The front door slammed open, Jonathan framed in the doorway. Joyce and Hopper pulled back from each other, blinking in the light that was spilling out from the house. They could hear Will yelling from the depths of the house.

"Jonathan," she said taking step forward, hand outstretched.

"About time. Will and I thought we might have to lock you in a cupboard soon," Jonathan said, a smile breaking over his face.

"You knew?" she asked.

"I think everyone but you two knew," he replied before hugging his mom. "Now come inside. It's too dark to be standing on the porch."

"I should be going," Hopper said, interrupting.

"Come in for a coffee," Joyce requested.

Jonathan clapped him on the back as he passed and gave him a tight lipped smile.

"Hey, Hop," Will said, emerging from his bedroom, quiet music leaking out from under the door.

"Hey, kid, how's it going?" he asked, slumping into one of the seats at the kitchen table.

"I got an A on my science project. And Mike says he has a new campaign for us this weekend," he said, taking his own seat at the table.

"Hey, that's great," he replied, watching Joyce making the coffee.

"And Nancy came over today," Will continued.

"Nancy Wheeler? Here?" he asked, mock shock in his voice. Jonathan turned a shade of pink. Hopper gave him a knowing smirk.

"And what was Nancy Wheeler doing here?" Joyce asked, setting the coffee down on the table.

"Something more innocent than what Hopper's doing here," he replied. Now Joyce blushed and Will grinned.

"She brought over some study notes," Will supplied.

"Just as long as that's all it was," Joyce said, pink still tinging her cheeks.

"Don't worry Joyce, Nancy wouldn't do anything while she's still seeing that Harrington kid," Hopper put in. She stood beside him and snaked her arm around his neck.

"No, I suppose she wouldn't," she replied. His arm went to hold her around the waist and Will laughed. Jonathan ruffled his hair and went back to the study den he'd created in the living room.

"Does this mean you guys are dating?" Will asked.

"Yes. Is that alright?" his mother replied.

"Yeah," he said before disappearing back into his room.

She lent against Hopper and he gently pulled her into his lap, hugging her tiny body to his. She sighed and closed her eyes, relaxing into him.

"I think that went well," he said, brushing his fingers through her hair. She nodded against his shoulder, burying her nose where his shoulder connected to his neck.

"Do you mind if I stay the night? I'm not sure I want to be going home?" he asked.

"You better be staying here, otherwise I'm not sure I'd have you back," she teased.

He settled further back on the chair, holding her tightly. She wrapped her own arms around him, breathing long and deep. They really did fit together like a two puzzle pieces.